

Adrian chemical puzzle

Culprit sought in cancer deaths

By JOHN BRODER
News Staff Writer

ADRIAN — A puzzling number of cancer deaths among persons living near a silicone plant northeast of Adrian has touched off a search by state and local health officials for a possible chemical culprit.

A week last week by the Lenawee County Health Department in response to an anonymous letter confirmed at least 12 deaths in the last 10 years, and officials planned a more thorough examination which, they said, could turn up more. Involved is a sparsely populated rural area covering slightly more than a square mile.

While officials caution that the rate may be statistically insignificant, Michigan Departments of Public Health and Natural Resources have ordered full-scale tests of air and water emissions from the SWS Silicones plant to see whether chemicals may have escaped from the facility and contaminated nearby homes and water supplies.

THE AGE RANGE of the confirmed victims was from five to 73 years. The tumors were found in the breast, lung, colon, bladder, rectum, bone, liver, lymph glands, ovaries and brain. There was also one case of leukemia.

The clustering of cancers near the plant "indicates possibly a higher incidence there" than might be expected, said Dr. John

Isbister, the state's top disease control officer. He said the situation — while possibly only a coincidence — merited further study of death records and plant emissions.

SWS Silicones, a subsidiary of the Connecticut-based Stauffer Chemical conglomerate, manufactures silicone products used in caulking, cosmetics and automotive sealants.

Its Adrian plant showed up on a nationwide list of 3,383 potentially hazardous toxic dump sites released by a congressional committee earlier this month.

ON THAT LIST — and on a similar inventory being prepared by the State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) — were an evaporation pond and a landfill on the plant property in Raisin Township northeast of Adrian.

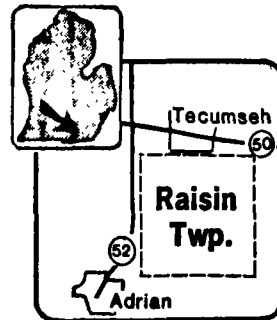
DNR water quality scientists nicknamed the pond "the black lagoon" after tests conducted Sept. 24 turned up what they called "alarmingly high levels" of methyl chloroform, a toxic compound used in the manufacture of pesticides and cleaning solvents. Tests have not yet determined whether methyl chloroform induces cancer in animals or humans.

"The tests upset our water quality people immensely," said DNR Deputy Director O.J. Scherschligt. "It's bad stuff as far as we're concerned. We were led to believe (by company officials) that it wasn't being discharged into the lagoon, and that's just not true."

IN ADDITION, plant officials acknowledge burying 5,100 tons of chemical wastes in a landfill on the plant site between 1965 and 1978. And while Dr. Leonard Bruner, SWS Silicones vice-president and plant manager, said he has "no indication of any hazardous materials leaking out" of the barrels, DNR officials aren't convinced and have scheduled tests of ground water beneath the pit.

Bruner said the barrels buried on the plant grounds contain resins, oils, sludges and heavy metals which are left over from the company's manufacturing processes.

"They would not be on any list of high toxicity materials, but you might find some lists that would characterize them as hazardous or toxic," Bruner said.



NEWS MAP

He said none of the chemicals currently in use at the plant are considered toxic — but a list supplied to DNR by the company includes 25 "potential or confirmed carcinogens," according to Dennis Swanson of DNR's Office of Toxic Materials Control.

SWANSON DECLINED to identify the chemicals. He said the DNR must promise the confidentiality of such information — at least until legal action is taken — if the company wishes to protect trade secrets from competitors.

In the anonymous letter that brought the matter to the attention of Lenawee County health officials, the author said: "I wish to express my deep concern about the environment" immediately surrounding the silicone plant.

"Not only people but animals have died, often with the very same symptoms," the letter said. "Even with the small area I wouldn't have thought so much of it if these people had died of unrelated causes."

THE LETTER LISTS 19 persons living near the plant who the writer said have died of cancer recently. A check of Lenawee County death records showed that at least 12 of those on the list had died of some form of cancer within the past 10 years.

The variety of cancers and the broad age range makes the medical detective work more difficult,

said Frederick Keeslar, Lenawee County environmental health specialist. "If we knew the contaminant, our job would be a lot easier. It's most difficult to trace something backwards from death records."

Officials, though, are centering their search for a possible source of contamination on SWS Silicones, because of its proximity to the homes of the cancer victims and a history of complaints of noxious odors emanating from the plant.

"EVERYBODY'S pretty sensitized to chemical problems down here," said Keeslar, referring to the recent publicity generated by the contamination of parts of nearby Adrian with Curen 442, a suspected carcinogen manufactured until six months ago by the Anderson Development Co.

"This situation reminds me of where we were when we first found out about Curen," Keeslar said. "We just can't ignore something like this letter."

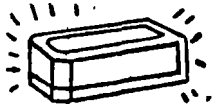
Plant manager Bruner feels the people of Adrian may be somewhat oversensitive.

"I'm quite confident there aren't any problems associated with this operation," he said.

"We understand that people will be concerned. But I'm comfortable working here. I drink from the same well as everyone else and seem to be thriving."

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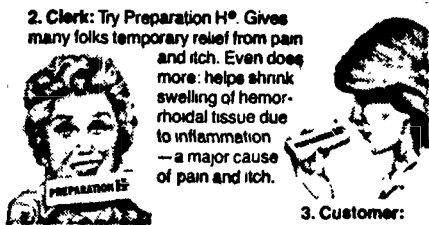


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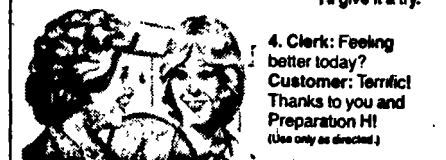
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3. Customer: I'll give it a try.
4. Clerk: Feeling better today?
Customer: Terrific! Thanks to you and Preparation H! (Use only as directed.)

Victim had friends he lost to cancer

Continued from Page 1B

Rocco says they all breathed the tiny slivers that floated in the air and coated surfaces.

pounds, maybe more," Rocco says. "They had to get rid of them, so they trucked 10-15 of them a week to the mill to be sawed up.

US EPA RECORDS CENTER REGION 5

1004985

A victim fights off cancer

Model maker recalls dust, fumes in shop

By DOUG BRADFORD
News Staff Writer

Eugene Rocco, who used to work in Fisher Body's wood model shop, didn't sleep well for nearly two months after he learned he had cancer. He says it was almost as if he could feel it chewing on his lung like "a black rat."

The lung was removed in March, 1978, and Rocco, now 56 and living on a disability pension, talks about how much luckier he was than some of his co-workers at the General Motors Tech Center, not far from his Warren home.

"Sure, I knew a lot of those guys," Rocco says. "Al Twist, Coy Swearingen . . . they were good model makers. They were in and out of the mill

where I worked all the time."

Twist and Swearingen died of brain cancer, Twist at 57 and Swearingen at 48. They are two of eight wood workers from the same shop who have died of cancer in recent years.

IN ALL, SINCE a worried co-worker of Eugene Rocco and the dead men brought his fears to The Detroit News, 40 cancer deaths and 25 cases of cancer have been confirmed at General Motors, Chrysler and Ford wood shops — and at independent wood job shops.

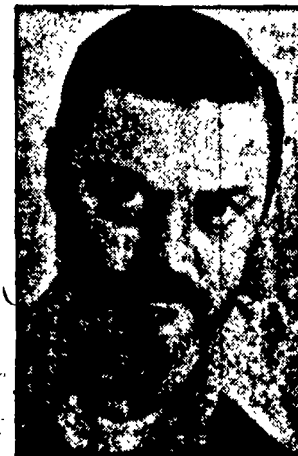
The National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, a federal agency, is investigating to determine whether something in the wood

shops is causing the cancers. GM is surveying the health records of all persons who have worked over the last 10 years in 15 of its wood shops in four states, to determine the dimensions of the situation.

Rocco was one of 10 wood machine operators working on shapers, routers, joiners, planes and various saws in the mill that serves the Fisher Body wood modeling shop at the Tech Center.

Twenty or 30 other workers, including the model makers, spent considerable time there, he says.

Continued on Page 5B



EUGENE ROCCO

'You couldn't wear a mask . . . They obscured vision. One slip and you could lose a finger.' — Rocco

LANSING MEMO

From Our Capital Bureau



MICHIGAN DRIVERS received plaudits from Gov. William G. Milliken last week at the Energy Expo in Detroit's Cobo Hall for conserving gasoline and switching to more fuel-efficient cars. But, as is so often the case, the good news was accompanied by some bad news.

Those conservation efforts, lamented the Michigan Department of Transportation, are cutting into highway revenues.

The Transportation Department said that despite 2-cent-a-gallon fuel tax increases and a 30 percent raise in license plate fees which took effect this year, revenues were only slightly up over last year.

labored long hours ironing out a compromise bill.

"If you could only have seen the notes we passed back and forth — we all got quite a kick out of it," one bemused committee member said. "We hadn't heard from him except to blast us for some of our early work."

LIFE'S BEEN somewhat of a pain these days for two state senators. Richard Allen, R-Lansing, is hobbling around with a cast on his right leg as the result of a torn Achilles tendon suffered in a touch football game. And Jack Faxon, D-Detroit,



Creditors slap State Police with collection suits

By PAT SHELLNBARGER
News Staff Writer

LANSING — Bridgeport mechanic Ron Gobeys and the huge Amoco Oil Co. are among hundreds of creditors waiting for the Michigan State Police to pay its bills.

Gobeys said yesterday the agency owes him nearly \$15,000 in auto repair bills. Two weeks ago, Amoco sued the state for nearly a half-million dollars for gasoline.

"We're fully aware of the problem, but there's nothing this agency can do about it right now," said Mark Molenda, State Police director of business administration. "It's an

Oakland

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company officials) that it wasn't being discharged into the lagoon, and that's just not true."

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Continued from Page 18

Rocco says they all breathed the tiny slivers that floated in the air and coated surfaces.

MOUTH MASKS were made available to the workers, Rocco says.

"But you couldn't wear a mask around those saws," says Rocco, who was placed on medical disability last spring. "They obscured your vision. One slip and you could lose a finger."

Rocco is all in favor of a thorough investigation of workers' fears that something in the dust in the wood shops, a chemical or some other agent, is causing cancer.

"I had two strikes on me," he says.

"There was the smoking (he says he smoked two packages of cigarettes a day) and there was the dust in the air all the time.

"And there was fumes from burning wood. It would get hot on the rip saws and smoke. You'd smell it all the time.

"After some jobs we'd dig the dust out of our eyes, ears and nose . . . it must have got into our lungs. Dirty brown goo, I called it."

ROCCO SAYS workers used air compression hoses to try to get the sawdust off their clothing before they went home, but that they were unsuccessful.

"There always was a film of dust," he said.

Union-management work studies were made after complaints of possible health hazards in the mill, Rocco says, but does not recall many corrective measures.

He says he remembers a dust removal system which failed to work efficiently.

One job the workers complained about involved very large models of automotive parts.

"They must have weighed 500

pounds, maybe more," Rocco says. "They had to get rid of them, so they trucked 10-15 of them a week to the mill to be sawed up.

"THEY WERE covered with dust, rat droppings, garbage and old oil, and it took six men to handle them. One guided them through the saw, and the rest of us held on.

"You wouldn't believe the amount of dust generated. It would get so thick you couldn't see . . . and sometimes we had to stop for awhile until it cleared."

Rocco speaks quietly and calmly. He says he feels a constant pain in his left side that never will go away, and that he gets short of breath because one lung cannot do the work of two.

After GM refused his request for an easier job, he filed a workers' compensation suit. He says he would rather work than accept his medical disability.

Rocco's family faced his cancer surgery realistically because, he says, they knew it had to be done. There were no tears, just fear.

"I just didn't think it could happen to me — I was scared stiff," he recalls. "I told the doctor maybe we shouldn't rush to operate, but he said we had to do it right away. Now I'm glad I got it in time."

ROCCO AND HIS wife, Angeline, discussed finances, what they would do if he failed to survive surgery and how they would pay off debts. All of his savings were depleted, he says.

She has taken a part-time job at a cafeteria.

"I was making between \$10 and \$11 an hour, now I'm getting \$880 a month pension," he says. "I can't collect Social Security because they say I can still work."

"But GM says I can't."

Creditors slap suits against State Police

Continued from Page 18

Any bills not covered by the transfer will be paid out of the budget for the new fiscal year, Molenda said.

State Police Director Gerald L. Hough blamed the budget shortfall on unanticipated increases in the costs of gasoline and auto repairs.

STATE TROOPERS have been directed to save gasoline and avoid the same fiscal problem this year by increasing "stationary patrol" — the amount of time a car is not moving — to a half hour out of each hour. Over-time also has been reduced.

"We're going to wait and see if this transfer of funds is enough," said Gobeyn, owner of the Bridgeport Standard service station near Saginaw. "But if it doesn't, I'm going to have to take local action."

tend to get my money."

Gobeyn said the state owes him \$14,789 for repairs done from June through October on State Police cars from the Bridgeport post.

Molenda estimated the department owes delinquent payments to "several hundred to 1,000" businesses around the state; mainly gas stations, garages, auto dealers and parts suppliers.

"I asked one of our people to compile a list of who we owe money to," Molenda said, "and the list turned out to be 69 pages long."

MOST OF THE shortfall — about \$1.4 million — is in a catch-all account called the "miscellaneous services contractual services supplies and materials account." It is supposed to cover gasoline, auto repairs, utilities and various supplies.



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REMARKS

Lee:

Attached is news clip on woodworking cancer
ths. While the main problem is OSHA/NIOSH related,
lier news clips identify some sources of the wood/
plastic assembly as Evans Products of Grand Rapids and
Koppers Co. location unspecified. Evans is an NPDES
permittee. Koppers Co. in the Reed City, MI area was
identified as being on the oversight committee's list
(according to news reports) of potential hazardous
waste dump sites. Other articles mentioned formalde-
hyde in connection with the "wood". Please advise if
you want the earlier news clips on this topic.

Robert M. Buckley

cc: Constantelos/Bremer 5/AHM

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